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Accidents

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Analysis from the White Mountains of New Hampshire and occasionally elsewhere

As often happens in the winter Whites, last January brought a number of freeze-thaw cycles that created plenty of slippery spots and bonding problems on avalanche-prone slopes. In years past such a setup has spawned ample trouble, and winter and spring 2018 offered their share. But unlike prior winters' mishaps, most of the 2018 accidents ended happily, even when climbers, sliders, and wanderers found downhill woe. So here's that rarity: a happy Accidents column with no fatalities but with a few cautions attached.

Checked In

On Sunday, April 22, 2018, Christophe C., age 70, set out from the Appalachia trailhead parking area at 7:45 a.m. for a partial Presidential Range traverse that would take him back to Pinkham Notch, where he had spent Saturday night. A cab dropped him off at the parking area, and Christophe aimed for summits: first Mount Adams and, from there, Mount Jefferson. The going was slow, and on Jefferson's summit, Christophe decided to bail out from his planned route and descend the Caps Ridge Trail. From that trail's base, he walked down Jefferson Notch Road to the Base Road, where he stashed his pack to make for lighter, quicker walking. Christophe then walked out the Base Road to the Mount Washington Hotel, where he checked in at 1 a.m.

Once checked in, Christophe messaged his wife, Marie, about his change in plans and turned toward sleep. Marie was awake and wondering about her husband, but she never got his message. So, at 3:48 a.m., she called New Hampshire State Police, who began looking for Christophe's car. They found it at the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, and at 6:30 a.m. they called New Hampshire Fish and Game to report a missing hiker. NHFG's Lt. Wayne Saunders took charge and asked Marie about her husband's projected route. She knew only that her husband was hiking in the Whites. Saunders began to

organize a search. A combination of cold weather, wintry ground conditions, Christophe's age, and a reported medical condition (not released to the public) helped NHFG decide to make that search an urgent, large one.

That weather gets its own paragraph here because it offers an ongoing reminder of how winter hangs on in the high Whites. April 22's temperature averaged 18 degrees Fahrenheit at the Mount Washington Observatory, and on the 23rd rose only to an average of 27. Both days featured full sun. But only a few days earlier, on the 20th, a foot of snow had fallen, and an added half-foot had accumulated in the following days. So, it was effectively still winter in the Whites, and Saunders knew time could be crucial.

At 10 A.M. a full-scale search got underway, with teams from NHFG and Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, snow rangers from the U.S. Forest Service, and snowcat drivers from Mount Washington State Park. Saunders also asked for and received a Black Hawk helicopter from the New Hampshire Army National Guard (NHANG). With all of this capability, searchers began to scour the trails above and below treeline, while the helicopter looked from above.

Not long after the search had begun, Saunders was updating Christophe's family when he learned that they had just gotten a call from Christophe. He was at the Mount Washington Hotel, exhausted from yesterday's hike, and he'd just awakened, unaware that he was the object of a large search. Saunders confirmed that this was indeed Christophe and then drove to the hotel, where at 1 P.M. Saunders interviewed Christophe.

Comment: This story was widely—and, at times, derisively—reported, with emphasis laid on Christophe going to a "posh" hotel* while the (by implication) regular folks of the world searched for him. But that slurs Christophe, I think, and misses the points that deserve attention.

Christophe made many mistakes: He failed to leave a detailed trip plan, he attempted an ambitious hike in winter-like conditions, he waited until 1 A.M. to send any message home, and then he did not check to be sure that message had been received. But once overextended, Christophe made some good decisions, the chief one being to bail out down the west side of the mountain, even though that left him a long way from his car at Pinkham Notch. Had he simply confirmed that his message had reached home, this would have been a

*See, for example, "Massive search finds overdue hiker . . . checked in at the Mount Washington Hotel," *New Hampshire Union Leader,* April 25, 2018. See unionleader.com/outdoors/massive-search-finds-overdue-hiker--checked-in-at-the-mount-washington-hotel--20180424.

self-rescue. What happened can be seen as another variation of the warnings not to rely too much on modern technology.

And the aftermath of this story offers a glimpse into Christophe's personality. He was chagrined (as most would be) when he found that a large search had

Whiteouts strip away the markers that locate us and substitute an uncertainty where even earth and sky can be confused. JERRY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

been mounted. As would be true for most of us, he didn't court attention or try to counter the media stories. Instead, he waited for attention to wash onto what came next, and then, before bills could be sent or any new outrage kindled, he sent NHFG a $3,000 check to defray the expenses of the search. That initiative and Christophe's remorse helped NHFG's Colonel Kevin Jordan decide not to bill him for his negligence leading to the search. The $3,000 he sent doesn't account for the volunteers' time and their disrupted lives nor cover the cost of the helicopter, although NHANG usually flies such a search as a training mission. The sum was nearly double NHFG's expenses for the short search. In a statement to the *Manchester Union Leader* published on July 11, Jordan said, "I could have still billed him. I just felt based on his remorsefulness, his respect, his understanding of the situation, and his promptness in getting a $3,000 check off before he had to at that point showed all good signs [that] we had accomplished what we set out to do."

Jordan noted that the military waived the cost of the helicopter, which flies at a rate he estimated at $6,000 per hour. He cautioned that the military might not waive those expenses in the future. That expense and who covers it may be one of the major, future stories of search and rescue in the Whites.

A final thought: For rescuers, confusion and uncertainty are often givens when they receive a call and set out to find or help someone. Most of us, however, read a narrative after the rescue's over, when a solution seems simple and obvious. "Just wait a bit, and see if he reappears," I heard one person say about this story and the search it launched. But Christophe's story points yet again to the way that our volunteers and professionals must sometimes make search-and-rescue decisions from sketchy information, or very little at all, and when they decide, they usually land on the side of offering significant help.

White Space

Column readers are familiar with "shoulder season" stories, and this is another one. November 27, 2017, visited winter-cold temperatures and 3.2 inches of snow outside the Mount Washington Observatory. The average temperature was 11 degrees F (14 degrees below normal), and the wind blew through at a perky 58-MPH average. So it takes little imagination to conjure spinning sheets of snow and tough visibility.

Not far from that summit, just after noon, Scott Z., age 47, had reached the point where the Monroe Loop leaves the Crawford Path, but he could see no trails at all. Above treeline and exposed to the pushy northwest wind,

Scott reached an uncertainty. He pulled out his phone and called for help. NHFG Lt. Brad Morse got the call, which included Scott's phone number and coordinates. Morse called Scott and left a message to call him, which Scott did a little after 1 P.M. Morse, having plotted Scott's location, told Scott to turn around and follow his tracks back along the ridgeline, explaining that this would take him into the relative shelter of trees in a little under a mile. Scott agreed and reported that his phone was carrying an 80-percent charge, and he signed off.

At 2:05 P.M. Scott called back, saying he felt he was off trail again, in four feet of snow with no visibility. Morse plotted Scott's new coordinates and called back to tell him that he was still on the Crawford Path and had made 0.75 mile of headway since his last call. Morse "advised him to continue in the same direction and attempt to follow his trail or the ridgeline," which would take him to the trees and protection from the wind "in a short distance." Morse also said that he would send several rescuers to Scott's assistance. Scott agreed to the plan. By then he also reported that his phone battery had dropped to under 10-percent charge; at 2:13 P.M. Morse lost contact with Scott.

Morse summoned three fellow NHFG conservation officers, who at 4:10 P.M. left the trailhead to find Scott. Ten minutes later, they returned with Scott. In an interview with Morse, Scott said that after their last phone conversation he had relocated the Crawford Path and kept descending. When he reached the Edmands Path, he had decided to "bail out," which took him to Mount Clinton Road, where he ran into the COs. Scott characterized himself as "an experienced hiker," and Morse found that "he was well equipped for hiking in winter conditions."

Comment: This phone-guided rescue verges on self-rescue, in keeping with the happy-endings theme for this column. But before we get too happy, let's go back up to the site of Scott's initial call and the fully realized winter that surrounded him. "Experience" can bring us to such a meeting between hiker and weather, but, unless that experience includes time already spent in such severe weather, the security of being experienced can fly away as quickly as a dropped mitten in a gale. Scott said in his post-noon call that he felt lost in a whiteout. We can imagine ourselves in such a new (and terrifying) reality. Morse, who knows these ridges and weathers well, served as the tether that kept Scott in touch with where he was and how he might get back to a point where his world again cohered. The hour between his first and second calls, while he battled down the Crawford Path ridge, obviously was a fraught one.

Scott was fortunate that his phone battery had enough charge for one more call just after 2 P.M. It kept him from stalling in the white room where he was stuck, and it kept rescuers from wondering where they might have to go. Once he reached the woods, Scott had returned to a world he recognized, one where he was fine.

Whiteouts strip away the markers that locate us and substitute an uncertainty where even earth and sky can be confused. What's down and what's up, we wonder. For the locator-animals we are, such uncertainty is very bad news, and it made Scott reach for his phone. Here's a rescue where a phone was a boon. It allowed Lt. Morse to orient Scott, and, even as rescuers were finally brought in, it kept them from walking up into the open question of Scott's direction; it gave them an aimpoint. Phones and other tech devices often provide false confidence that encourages overextension because help seems always at hand. But here, trouble materialized in heavy wind and stirred snow, through which only Scott's phone signal could penetrate. Scott didn't go out seeking a whiteout and its frightening stasis; it found him, and he called out from its booth where he was stuck.

Did Scott's experience justify his climbing on that ridge on this day? I'd say not. Could he have anticipated such conditions? The observatory forecast for snow and strong northwest winds, which would obscure the Crawford Path's approach, suggest that, yes, with a close reading and given his experience, he could have anticipated the day and the way it blew in a white space.

The group members began their return descent to the Highland Center and soon encountered Crawford Brook, which they had crossed earlier. But now it had become an impassable torrent.

Water-Girt

A thaw replete with significant rain let loose the mountains' most lethal element on January 12, 2018, and the rising waters trapped an Appalachian Mountain Club guided hike between impassable brooks. The two guides and

eight hikers had left the Highland Center early that morning and climbed the Avalon Trail to the A-Z Trail, which they planned to follow to Zealand Falls Hut for a two-night stay. Reaching a brook on the Zealand Trail on the west side of the Willey Range, the party found it flooded and determined it unsafe to cross. After some scouting for safe passage brought no better option, they turned back for the Highland Center.

January 12's weather summary from the nearby Mount Washington Observatory recorded an inch of rain and an average temperature of 40. At the lower elevations the hiking party was crossing, it was even warmer, and a lot of water melted out from the snowpack. Once a snowpack is saturated in winter, brooks rise rapidly. The AMC group members began their return descent to the Highland Center and soon encountered Crawford Brook, which they had crossed earlier. But now it had become an impassable torrent. The two guides scouted up- and downstream for a safe passage but found none. As the afternoon deepened, they called AMC for assistance, and after SAR coordinator James Wrigley spoke with the guides and ascertained that they needed help, he called NHFG. Lt. Brad Morse took charge of the effort, and, given the technical nature of the river crossing, Morse asked for help from Mountain Rescue Service. At 8 P.M. a group of nine rescuers (one CO, seven from MRS, and one from AMC) left the Highland Center and climbed toward the stranded hikers. At 10:50 P.M. rescuers reached the hikers, where they set up a brook crossing, helped the hikers over it, and walked with them back to the Highland Center. Even while rescuers did their work, the streams were beginning to recede as the rain faded and winter cold began its return.

Comment: As noted earlier, a full-blooded thaw, with rain and warm temps, can act quickly on backcountry streams. Snow can act as a buffer and soak up initial rains and meltwater, but once it's wet, everything begins to go downhill. River ice may also slow or spread the waters initially, but significant rain and thaw together often blow out ice blocks, leaving a roaring current between slippery banks of ice and snow. And, of course, that water is very cold; falling in is life-threatening. All of this proves the need for real caution when crossing streams during a thaw, and AMC's group exercised such caution twice. The first time, doing so frustrated members' plan to reach and stay at Zealand Fall Hut; the second time, it kept them out deep into the night as they tried to get back to the Highland Center. That the group didn't try to force

passage in either case points to good leadership. It can't have been easy to get nowhere—in sum—over the course of a wet day and half a night.

Because weather's variability increases with climate change, we are likely to see more of these quick melts. Cold was on its way back in that evening, and so, waiting for that stabilization was an option, but the group was not carrying shelter for ten; they had planned to stay at Zealand Falls Hut. So, after a conversation with AMC SAR coordinator James Wrigley, the guides decided that, in the face of predicted falling temperatures, getting out that night was prudent.

The question raised in the aftermath of the incident and one we arrive at in this column is: Should the hikers have set out to Zealand at all? The forecasted rain and thaw, and the near certainty that a lot of water would be moving, suggests it would have been wise to wait a day or cancel. Such factors as scheduled departures and returns, as well as reservations, can nudge us toward carrying on when we might be better off delaying or opting out. In a note, Wrigley did say, "The incident led to some discussion regarding go/no-go decisions based upon weather. In retrospect the amount of water that was forecasted along with temperatures should have raised some flags."

Finally, party size may have influenced the decision to call for help. Well-equipped solo hikers or twosomes can wait out a river rise and make an informal camp with less trouble than can a group of ten.

Seeds of Disinformation: Some Thoughts About Calling Out

On mild January 20, 2018, a group of nine from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Outing Club climbed the East Peak of Mount Osceola with the aim of going on to the main summit. But once atop the 4,156-foot subsidiary peak, they found the trail too slippery and decided to turn back. During their descent, around 2:30 P.M., Megan C. slipped and injured her leg. A passing hiker called 911 as he headed down, but the reception was spotty, so the call was cut off before the caller could identify himself.

At a little after 4 P.M. NHFG received a call from state police reporting the accident. Sgt. Thomas Dakai took charge of the response. Dakai first called the number from which the original 911 call had come; he had no name because that call had been dropped. Dakai got no answer and left a voicemail, which he followed with a text message, asking for a call back.

Using the coordinates offered by the call, Dakai plotted its origin as the Mount Osceola Trail about a half-mile above its junction with the Greely Ponds Trail. Dakai summoned two more COs to the Greely Ponds trailhead on Route 112. As he drove to meet his fellow officers, Dakai learned that the caller by then had contacted the town of Lincoln police to say that he was a passerby; originally, he had reported the injured person as male, and he corrected that to say she was female.

As the COs prepared to hike in from the trailhead, five members of the party appeared. They reported that the injured hiker was with three others, and all four were making their way down slowly. Two COs started in, and a half-mile in and a little after 7 P.M., they met the rest of the party and turned and hiked back out with them.

During a subsequent interview, Dakai asked if the party had been aware that the passerby was going to call in the accident. After some silence, the group said, yes, they were aware. As he was driving away from the incident, Dakai also finally got a return call from John B., the hiker who had made the 911 call. In a later phone call, Dakai asked Megan why her group had not called 911 instead of having a passerby do so. She was unsure and thought perhaps they hadn't had cell service, but she also made clear that she and the group had intended to hike out on their own, with or without help.

Comment: This incident, although not serious, illustrates a problem rescuers commonly face, the outflow of partial and inaccurate information. As in the Crawford Path incident, phones enabled rescuers to hear from and locate people more quickly, but they also broadcast seeds of disinformation. Spotty reception cut off the call before the full story came out.

Cell coverage problems are common in the Whites, but the main problem in such situations is another common one: A passerby feels compelled to call but then moves on or vanishes. What John's call conveys in this incident is a sense of emergency with no specifics that would help Sgt. Dakai discern what sort of response he should gather. The passerby's information was composed of fleeting impressions, and one can imagine him then hurrying off in search of a signal. What results is often emergency compounded by mystery, all of which is dumped in a CO's lap from afar.

One rule of response from veteran Tuckerman Ravine snow rangers Brad Ray and Chris Joosen might help those of us who come upon an accident and must then decide if and when to call for help. When you are evaluating and describing a problem you have witnessed, do so sitting down, even if you are in a gale. If you call, speak slowly. Being seated and speaking deliberately slow

the flow of emergency's juice, adrenaline, and rescuers on the other end of the line are likely to get better information on which to found their efforts.

Times Tough

This is the story of two days and a night, all compressed into less than 24 hours, which is to say that conventional time isn't always a reliable measure when the going gets tough in the Presidentials.

Wednesday at 5:35 P.M. is not a usual time for a rescue call, but on January 10, 2018, NHFG Lt. Wayne Saunders answered one. Sometime earlier, a locator beacon registered to Amy B., age 45, had sent aloft its distress signal from the flank of Mount Monroe. The beacon service had alerted Amy's point of contact, her friend Jeff A., at 5:10 P.M.; he in turn called in the emergency. Saunders hurried to get three COs and respond.

The day had been a fine one: abundant sunshine, average temperature of 20 (15 degrees above normal), with a moderate (for adjacent Mount Washington) northwest wind averaging 40 MPH at the observatory on top. That fine weather, tracked for days as it neared, had been part of Amy's planning. Not a dedicated deep-winter hiker, but surely an experienced hiker who was within sniffing distance of completing her list of the 67 highest peaks in New England, Amy had climbed Washington a number of times before. Before oncoming tax season swept her—a certified public accountant—into its own seasonal storm, she hoped for a free day on the mountain.

In the days leading up to her hike, Amy repeatedly checked the weather for the 10th, and even though a grand day was promised, her experience and sense of order informed her decision to pack 30 pounds of gear into her backpack. She drove to the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail's base and began her climb at a little after 8 A.M. Just before she did so, she checked the weather again, renewed her hikeSafe card, and walked over to look at the trail's outset. The weather forecast continued to promise a good day, with possible rain and ice moving in that night; the trail was hard-packed, easy walking, even as the past few days had dropped around 6 inches of new snow on the mountain. The day was a blue-sky "yes." Amy donned her pack, decided to forgo her snowshoes, and started off. As she climbed, Amy also turned on her phone tracker so a friend could follow her progress.

The morning was as promised, and Amy interspersed climbing at pace with taking tens of photos, a sort of celebration of all she could see. On beautiful mountain days the photos we take are often postcards to ourselves—look

where I was, and what a day! Amy passed Lakes of the Clouds Hut a little before 11 A.M. and, admiring all around her and taking more photos, reached the Tuckerman Crossover to Tuckerman Ravine at around noon. There she noted that the wind felt stronger, and she turned up for the top.

Amy's schedule called for reaching the summit by 12:30 P.M. and descending to her car by 4 P.M.; that was both her intent and routine. She checked in with her father by phone at 12:30, with her friend Jeff soon after, and kept climbing. Amy summited at 1:30 P.M., still enjoying a gorgeous day, and she checked in again with Jeff. The wind had accelerated some, with worrisome gusts. (Observatory records would show those winds gusted to 70 MPH on the 10th.) She began to feel a bit uneasy, and as she started down, she hurried a bit, ate half a sandwich, and discarded the rest. She also noted that all the photos she'd taken had run down her phone's battery, but she plugged in a portable battery charger and went down.

At the junction for the Crossover, Amy's premonition shifted to outright worry. She could see sheets of snow rising from the ground and off Mount Monroe, obliterating her earlier footprints. When Amy reached Lakes of the Clouds Hut and the trail sign for her descent, she could see no sign of the boot-track path. Three times she began her descent where she thought the trail should be; three times she got quickly into deep, soft snow and climbed back to the hut. It was now after 2 P.M., and the imperative to get down grew stronger. There, her phone went dead.

Two drainages nearly converge at the hut: the Ammonoosuc River and its eponymous trail and Monroe Brook, which bears away then to the left of a descending hiker. Amy knew she wanted to trend to the right and tried to do so, but somehow in the wind and snow-swaddled terrain, she ended up in the Monroe Brook drainage, fighting her way down. Here, the accelerant of real fear took over, beginning to drive her over rough terrain and through deep snow, with a goal now of simply getting to the trees. There, at least, would be relative shelter. At 2:35 P.M. at the outset of this wallow down, Amy pressed her emergency SPOT signal. "I knew I wasn't getting out that night, and I wanted people to know where to find me," she said later. "Pressing that button was very hard."

Then she kept working to get down, sinking into holes, getting caught by krummholz, rolling at times through the steep snow. Her descent stripped away a water bottle and phone charger, broke a pole and, most troublesome, joined work's sweat with the snow in soaking her. Amy estimates that by dusk,

at a little after 4 P.M., she'd descended a mile and a half. There, in the thin trees, she stopped and found an open area where she could be seen. "I knew I needed to stop and make camp before it got dark," she said. "And I was very tired." That began the wait, a wait intensified by fear as she found that her struggle through the snow had soaked both her and her extra gear, even through a waterproof pack. She now worried about hypothermia.

Amy cut branches for insulation between her and the snow, got out her emergency shelter and wrapped herself in it, put on both her hats, and fought a sense of rising panic and the cold. Waiting can be even harder than wallowing. She could feel the heat generated from her descent draining off. To combat her cooling Amy had a bivy sack and shelter, but no food and only frozen water and wet clothing. Both to stay active and to get warmth, Amy gathered bark shavings and sticks and started a fire. Even in the wind, she got it to take, and she felt the lift of its light and small heat; she warmed her cold feet over it, but it blew out before she could dry anything. It was a little after 6:30 P.M.

Time crawled forward, and Amy kept working to fight off the cold and worried about those waiting at home. Around 8 P.M. she started another fire, which burned hotter, lasted longer, and offered again some warmth and optimism. She got out bivy sack number 2 and a foil blanket. Part of the time it rained and sleeted. At some point, while cutting brush and fighting through scrub, Amy cut her hand significantly, and she was only partially able to stanch the blood with bandaging. She waited.

As she waited, Amy also blew her emergency whistle periodically. She kept alternating standing, sitting, and working to keep moving; she did exercises; she whistled into the darkness. After midnight, she began to look forward to dawn. "If," she said to herself, "I can get there, I can try to get down."

Around 1:55 A.M., she blew her whistle again. She got a "Hello?" in response. And soon after she got COs Matt Holmes, Mark Ober, and Jim Cyr, who had warm Gatorade and dry socks, as well as other assistance. A little later, the four began their descent, working back 0.8 mile to the trail and then down, emerging from the woods around 4 A.M.

Comment: Amy generously shared this tough tale, and its details contain much of the cautioning this column's comments usually offer. What recommends it as a cautionary story is the way even the most prepared of us can face a weather shift and unanticipated trouble. Even as we may have been up many mountains in many weathers, no one day copies exactly those that precede it. Surprise always waits in the Whites.

In retrospect, Amy was gathered into the spirit of an expansive, blue-sky day, where the pleasure of seeing and sharing it via photos and phone slowed her from her usual adherence to a plan. When the wind rose and blew that beauty into clouds of snow that obscured the way, Amy was still up high and had fallen behind schedule. This new experience rattled her. The simple following of a trail became a nightmare of guesswork, which then became an off-trail struggle in deep snow without snowshoes. Even the COs who rescued Amy said they were sinking in to their waists with their snowshoes on.

Snowshoes. When snow is on the ground, whatever the condition of the trail, take them. It's impossible to predict when or if we'll be driven off trail. The tracking system on Amy's phone might have led her back along the route she ascended, but at the hut her phone went dead and even her backup chargers were depleted, and so she had to guess. That phone failure also left her guessing about whether her emergency signal had gotten through. And so the mix of equipment failure and inexperience in such weather plunged Amy into her long night. Phone technology fails at inopportune times, especially in winter, when cold saps batteries and backup chargers. A winter hiker needs other fallbacks. Amy's packing for contingency, her resilience, and her rescuers' persistence saved her.

One puzzling lacuna is the gulf of time between when Amy remembered pressing her SPOT device, at 2:35 P.M., and her contact Jeff's receiving notice of its activation two and a half hours later, at 5:10. Jeff then called NHFG, who recorded his call at 5:35 P.M., and the rescue began. It seems that the signal must not have gotten through until that later hour.

Some key junctures emerge from the fear-amped afternoon. First, trouble was in the offing when the snow blew up into clouds while Amy stood at the Crossover junction; the second was at the hut, where three times she tried to set out on the trail down. In both instances, what's called for is calm, and what the situation urges is anxious hurry. Sitting in the lee of the hut for some minutes and looking at a map, getting out her compass, and even trying to see if her phone could be rejuvenated might have helped Amy find the right way down. Of course, she still would have had to contend with the newly blown-in snow. Also, as the night-wait deepened, it would have been good to have a cache of emergency food and some way to melt snow.

At the outset of this account, I alluded to the way reality can blur in the dark hours of emergency. Here's a little more evidence of that strangeness in NHFG's Lt. Saunders' reflection after the rescue: "They [the three COs] said it

was strange. [After they made voice contact] they could see her but not quite get to her. It took 30 minutes to get to her, swimming through the snow and brush," Saunders said. "The guys were pretty beat when they came out."

Amy has expressed her gratitude by telling her story so that others may learn from it, and by going with family and friends to thank NHFG and donating $1,000 for purchase of equipment for their rescue team.

An added note: I asked Amy if she had a takeaway or two, and she offered two that resonate with much of what this column is about: First, yes, carry emergency gear, but make sure you also know how all of it works. Practice with it. And second, it's OK to ask for help, even when you are experienced and expect not to need it.

Solo or No-No

Readers may have noted that three of the preceding incidents involved solo hikers. That raises a favorite question among hikers and search-and-rescue personnel: Should someone hike alone, and if so, when?

I have a few thoughts, which regular readers of this column will recognize, and, as you think this through, I wonder what your thoughts are. People hike and climb solo for a number of reasons; chief among them are preference for being alone and convenience. (If you hike in midweek, it can be hard to find companions; a troop of one has only one schedule to consider.)

In each of these three solo incidents, I can make a sound argument for why it was a risky choice. For Christophe, the mix of his age, the week's preceding snowfall, and projected length of his hike suggest that he would have benefited from being with a competent companion or two. Scott climbed into conditions common to winter but which stymied him. Being able to work out how to deal with his limited vision and trouble finding the trail with experienced, companion hikers would have been useful. Amy climbs solo often, and she had the fitness and gear she needed. What outflanked her were the winter weather and her relative inexperience with it. A hiking companion might have felt superfluous on the blue-sky day she had at first, but when the wind rose and the blown snow obscured the way, another problem-solver might have helped.

I take to trails solo most of the time, and so I think a lot about it and certainly don't condemn the choice. Before I go, I review my route or routes

and the predicted weather in granular fashion: What's the terrain, what do forecasters predict, and what small variations do I predict from reading maps and radar? Then I run through possible scenarios and what they may ask of me, both in resolve and equipment. If this trip then looks familiar, if I have "been there" before, I feel OK about taking the solo risk. If, however, something in the scene looks new—weather or ground conditions, terrain, region, trail—I may back away toward something familiar, and save the new for a time when a friend or friends can join me.

Winter Reading

In past issues, I've often cited the stories and advice available to winter's climbers and sliders on the Mount Washington Avalanche Center's website (mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org). If you want to know about sliding snow, or sliding on it, that site is the place to go. While the site's articles describe what takes place in Mount Washington's famous east-facing ravines and bowls (Tuckerman and Huntington, primarily), its lessons apply to any snow slope. Reading its predictions and summaries is like having a very snow-smart friend.

I recommend reading the analysis of a number of avalanches in Tuckerman Ravine on April 7, 2018. The USFS snow rangers offer a clear summary of the weather that preceded and set up that day, and then the way the fresh snow slabs on its peopled slopes responded to all those skis and feet. In keeping with this column's happy-endings theme, injuries on that day were few and not life-threatening, even as the snow-action was impressive—and cautionary. You can get to the site in a few clicks; if you like winter slopes, it's always worth the trip.

Running the Risk

A version of this piece first appeared on the site iRunFar (irunfar.com), an excellent resource for stories and advice about moving at pace in mountains around the world, and especially in the American West. Its two editors, Meghan Hicks and Byron Powell, are accomplished backcountry runners and humanists.

Mountain-running or speed-hiking, especially in new terrain (but even on your home mountain), will always be edgy because it seeks out ways and lands and weathers that contain lots of edges.

Perhaps the greatest risk lies in a stretch of time when a risky activity feels expansive, both personally and societally. That phase, which draws in growing numbers of inexperienced people and which seems current in our mountains, overwhelms any system of elders passing on essential knowledge to the new. In its congestion, it also may foster more competition, as the novices seek to "make their bones" and rise above the general rabble of us. So often, I think, this need to be known is rooted in a need to be notable to one's self.

Over the past few years, while researching *Critical Hours* (University Press of New England, 2018), my book about search and rescue in the White Mountains, and while continuing this semiannual column analyzing mountain accidents, I've had a chance to think more about the risks we take when we aim for and run along the edges of the trail-world we love. It is, both in topography and psychology, a vertiginous world.

Still, runners and other quick travelers make up a very thin fraction of those who encounter trouble in our mountains. Every so often, I get a report of rescue of a trail runner or some-related-one seeking speedy passage over our mountain trails, but I don't see many. Even as ultrarunners and adventurers press on and at limits and incur plenty of pain in doing so, there's surprisingly little call for rescue from this foot-happy community. What accounts for that? And how do those of us who view going out long as living large envision risk as we step-step away? These seem important questions for each of us as we look up and out to our mountains.

In my book, I devoted a chapter to such questions, though I used for example the study of the way two minimalist, long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail got in gradual trouble on a textbook day for hypothermia. But within that chapter I also cited Yitka Winn's fine insights from a 2016 *Trail Runner* piece on the death of ultrarunner Arturo Hector Martinez Rueda in Patagonia. Within Winn's thoughts are good points about both the gifts and potential problems that endurance athletes bring to their trails. Those trails ignore the loops of track and field and the pavements of road racing and head instead out into the hills. From those hills, runners have to conjure their own returns.

A few of Winn's comments:

> Serious accidents and fatalities are not uncommon in the worlds of climbing, mountaineering, and backcountry skiing. Such communities are accustomed to grappling with questions of risk, of where responsibility belongs when things go wrong. Entire books are devoted to

detailing preventable disasters in the mountains, and the lessons others can glean from them.

For many of us trail runners, though, these conversations are uncharted waters—especially those who arrive to the sport with a background not in wilderness travel, but in endurance. In some ways the very tenets of trail running's culture fly in the face of the traditional code of caution. Every mountaineer's been taught to be wary of "summit fever." Conversely, many ultrarunners' code is "to endure at all costs; DNF* is a dirty word."

We travel light, we push through pain, we chuckle at our body's physical rebellions, joke about stumbling or hallucinating or vomiting. For our stubbornness and triumphs, we're awarded medals and belt buckles. We get labeled inspirations, immortals, machines, kings and queens of the mountains, conquerors of the wild.

And sometimes we are.

But it becomes easy for any of us—runners or race organizers, outdoor veterans or novices, midpackers or elite runners—to forget how thin the line between life and death on the trail really is.

Twinned with Winn's writing as a spur for thought was Luke Nelson's quiet, insightful iRunFar post about mountain running and risk from June 2016. Framed by a stormy-day run, where Nelson judged that he had just enough wherewithal to come back intact, and triggered by Rueda's death a few months earlier, Nelson's post looked closely at accidents and the contributing factors of ignorance and complacency. What he wanted to know and have us think about is where responsibility lies in this life of going out into upland terrain, whether it's along the arranged course of a race, or the self-conjured route of a solo run. Both Winn's and Nelson's pieces rewarded rereading, as do many of the comments they occasioned.

I've a few thoughts to add, and I hope you will add yours. Both Winn and Nelson point to the role of experience in shaping a healthy perspective on trail running's risks. Bruising encounters with the land get pointed to as primary teachers, ways in which we grow wiser as miles accrue. My own experience in the mountains suggests that whatever wisdom I've developed stems from my experience and what both my conscious (rational) mind and its larger,

*Did not finish.

unconscious twin make of it. Whenever I have a decision to make—do I turn back, keep on, break out my map?—I am of two minds.

Those two minds offer decision variously. I make my rational calls by weighing observations and evidence and measuring them against my tolerance for risk. Which has also been arrived at rationally. Then, there is intuition, that tingling "spider-sense," where I just know what I'll do, often instantly—I'll risk this cloud; I won't risk that one. Over time I've come to trust my intuition in certain places (on Mount Cardigan, my home mountain, for example), while in others (new lands, a western glacier), I hear its voice as noise only, and I try to stay in my "right," my rational mind. On a best day, both minds are fired up and in agreement; then I am as fully aware as I can be. Not, of course, immune to risk and accident, but as inoculated as possible against it.

Knowing a bit about one's intuition seems useful and necessary, partly because it is so quick to make its call and partly because over time many of us come to trust it. The speedy, inner workings of intuition came clearer to me when I read Danny Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). There, while describing intuition's sometimes eerie insights, Kahneman offered a story about a fire chief who, while leading his crew in battling a blaze, got an intuition of trouble. The chief cleared his crew from the building, and immediately after that, the building fell in, a collapse that would likely have killed them all.

How did the chief "know" to leave the building? Rational analysis of the facts at that moment pointed away from his decision, but later analysis showed that the chief had somehow guessed that the fire was configured differently from what everyone then thought. That feeling of difference, that intuition, had spooked him, and he got everyone out without being able to say exactly why he was doing so.

So where, Kahneman wanted to know, did that quick feeling come from? His tracery got to a familiar answer, one both Winn and Nelson cite too: The chief's intuition came from his experience, not from some special, extrasensory gift. He had been in so many burning buildings before that he sensed something wrong before he could know or explain what it was.

I offer this example because, after a number of after-the-fact analyses, I now also think intuition is rooted in experience. And, if I accept that, then I must turn to my mountain experience as a way of knowing when to trust my intuition, when to follow a decision that can't possibly be fully thought out in a rational sense.

A small but growing number of people show up to hike, climb, or recreate in a place "discovered" online.

Experience is another word for time spent, and time spent in the presence of a master is another way of describing an apprenticeship. That's an old-fashioned word, and it even contains an off-putting whiff of being trapped in a livelihood and life, but I want to appreciate its positive possibilities here. To do so, I'll contrast it with a more modern word, *training*. We are always training or being trained, it seems. But training's aim is often narrow and its duration short. It's the sort of learning that prepares one for an assembly-line life—get real good at this one skill, then repeat, repeat, repeat.

An apprenticeship, however, lasts over time. Even when the apprentice strikes out on her or his own, becomes then master of self, the shaping work of the old master endures, is evident. Learning to be your own master takes a long time, a lifetime.

So it is, I think, in the mountains and with the various ways we step into and through them. If lucky, each of us becomes apprentice to a person, often an elder, *and* a landscape, a home mountain. At his or her feet, on our own feet, we learn; the lessons add up slowly. Often those lessons contain hard contact. We later treasure these bruises and scars—we won't do it that way again, but we're glad we did it once.

This slow uphill climb of time becomes finally our intuitive sixth sense in our mountains. But skipping those apprentice-steps, wanting to get "out there" in a hurry, sometimes leads runners and explorers to trust instead the judgments of others, and if ever those judgments are off, or a runner runs out of them, he or she can be left in the out there of trouble. Yitka Winn points out that trail runners can arrive at their mountains with a full résumé for endurance even as the trails and their ranges are all new. You can go a long way with such a résumé. So they can get a long way into terrain they know little of, or a long way into trouble without having the experience to recognize and manage it.

By now, you may be nodding off or paging ahead to see where this all ends. One more thread, and then I'll tie off (and I will check my knot). The

development of solid analytical skills and experienced-based intuition must now contend also with the virtual world and its seductive promises—of course you can find whatever out; no need to memorize (which is a time-intensive knowing); simply click once or twice and it's here . . . or there.

As I write about mountain accidents and incidents, I've noticed a small but growing number that feature people showing up to hike or climb or recreate in a place "discovered" online. In the Summer/Fall 2018 issue, I wrote about a family that went online and found a swimming hole in a patch of New Hampshire wilderness. They set out for a July swim. The two adult sons ran ahead, and when they reached the pool, one simply jumped in. The water was high and roiled from recent rains, and for reasons unclear (it happened under water) that son foundered; his brother leapt in but was unable to bring the first man out of the water because of the steep-sided rocks, and the man drowned.

Leaping from a computer screen into a scene seen there can be both tempting and trouble. There is so much to know before you go.

I've just looked back at my working title for this piece—Running the Risk; it occurs to me that The Risk would be a good name for a trail, a lifelong one. Here's to it, then—I'll see you out on one corner or another of The Risk.

— Sandy Stott
Accidents Editor